

Opening Statement of Rep. Jan Schakowsky
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade
Hearing on “Mixed Martial Arts: Issues and Perspectives”
December 8, 2016

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

When I first heard that we would be having a hearing on Mixed Martial Arts, I was surprised. I confess that I am not an MMA fan. I’ve had to learn a little more about MMA in preparation for this hearing, and I don’t think it’s going to be my new hobby. However, you don’t have to be an MMA fan to recognize the need for greater negotiating power and stronger protections for MMA fighters.

Our colleague Congressman Mullin used to be an MMA fighter. I chatted with him about his sport, and yesterday I met other MMA fighters in my office. The lack of leverage they have in their contract negotiations is really shocking. And that comes through when you look at differences in pay and benefits between MMA and other sports. Congressman Mullin comes to this issue as an MMA fighter; I come to it as a fighter for workers’ rights. But today, I think that puts us on the same side.

When I saw what MMA is, the mother in me came out a little bit. I don’t know why you would do that to yourself. But MMA fighters love their sport, and they should be able to fight. I do, however, want to make sure that they aren’t put at unnecessary risk.

Safety for fighters and the structure of MMA are very interlinked. Generally speaking, fighters only get paid if they are in a match. They have to secure their

own health insurance because the organizer's insurance just covers injuries within a match – not the injuries that frequently happen in weeks of training beforehand. That forces fighters to push themselves – sometimes at personal risk.

MMA can involve blows to the head. For me, that immediately raises concerns about brain injuries, which we have seen in other contact sports. Two months ago, 25 year-old Jordan Parsons became the first MMA fighter to be diagnosed with chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). This should not be surprising. Research has shown that repetitive hits to the head have cumulative, long-term effects on brain function and physiology, and may increase the risk of CTE.

CTE is not new to members of the Energy and Commerce Committee. Last March, in response to a question I raised, a National Football League representative admitted – for the first time – a definitive link between football and CTE. Dr. McKee was at that roundtable. Representatives Frank Pallone, Gene Green, Diana DeGette and I have also been pressing the National Hockey League do more to reduce risk of head injuries. MMA is just the latest sport where CTE is an issue.

We have seen some progress at the state level already. New York State included a provision in its MMA legislation that recognizes the risk of brain trauma and requires MMA promoters to carry insurance to cover treatment of life-threatening brain injuries.

If – knowing the risks – adults still want to be part of MMA fights, that's fine. But fighters and promoters should take some basic precautions, and fighters should have the leverage to stand up for their own safety. In Dr. McKee's written testimony, she provides some recommendations on the risk of brain injuries in MMA can be reduced.

We also need to support further research on the connection between CTE and contact sports so that adults know the risks. Research is especially critical given the risk to young athletes.

According to ESPN, an estimated 3.2 million kids 13 and under now participate in MMA. Kids can start classes as early as 6 years old. Some leagues ban head hits for younger fighters. However, Dr. Rebecca Carl from the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness warns that kids don't need to be hit in the head to experience brain injury: "The force of being thrown to the ground is enough to injure the brain. I don't think there's enough data available to say that MMA is safe for children."

I want to further explore how MMA can be safer and fairer for fighters of all ages. Thank you to our witnesses for being here today, and I look forward to your testimony.